

## **New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>**

### **Death sentence**

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Stephen Johnson served New York with valor for 21 years as a firefighter on the nation's preeminent force. He was a man who put the safety of others above his own. He loved the work - and it cost him his life.

On Aug. 6, 2004, Stephen Johnson died from service in the line of duty at age 47. Yet the rolls of honor do not bear his name, nor has the mayor or the fire commissioner stood in public tribute to this fallen hero.

For Stephen Johnson is a forgotten victim of 9/11.

The official record carries Johnson as a retired firefighter who passed away after a heart attack and a bout with a lung ailment two years after he left the force. This is because, callously and in disregard of overwhelming evidence, the City of New York has refused to acknowledge even the likelihood that working around the smoldering rubble of the World Trade Center proved fatal to anyone.

But that is precisely what killed Johnson, whose death stands as the earliest Ground Zero fatality from disease for which cause and effect has been established.

And it is precisely what killed Police Officer James Godbee.

And it is precisely what killed Detective James Zadroga.

And it is precisely what killed Emergency Medical Service Paramedic Debbie Reeve.

They were among the 40,000 people who pulled together in the drive to restore New York's footing after 9/11. Today, more than 12,000 members of that brave army are ill because they were exposed to the toxic cloud that hovered over what became known as The Pile.

Officials falsely assured them the air was safe. Most were not provided with or did not wear respiratory protection.

The vast majority of the sick suffered damage to their respiratory tracts from breathing air thick with particles, including concrete dust, pulverized glass and asbestos. The materials, in effect, burned the air passages, causing inflamed sinuses, bronchitis and reactive airways dysfunction syndrome, or RADS, an irritant-induced asthma.

A smaller number of Ground Zero responders contracted even more serious illnesses, and some died. How many developed their conditions as a consequence of working at The Pile cannot now be established, and medical experts are skeptical about proving a causal relationship in most cases.

But there can be no reasonable doubt that Ground Zero service cost Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve their lives. Where Johnson and Reeve are concerned, the FDNY's top physicians, Drs. Kerry Kelly and David Prezant, say they believe this is so. The evidence is just as strong for Godbee and Zadroga.

"How else do you account for it?" Kelly said, referring to Reeve's death.

It is long past time to set the record straight about fatalities among the forgotten victims of 9/11 — to honor those who have died, to keep faith with history and to provide the sick with the fullest information.

It's time for Mayor Bloomberg to recognize Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve as heroes who died from illnesses sustained in the line of duty, and to express New York's gratitude to their loved ones.

It's time for the mayor, upon whom we have called to lead a campaign for all forgotten victims of 9/11, to declare that New York owes the Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve families every possible benefit — and to order city lawyers to stop unconscionably fighting against giving the families their due.

It's time to confront what happened to Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve in the knowledge that medical experts say others may well develop serious, even fatal, illnesses as the 9/11 health disaster unfolds. Let them not be forgotten, too.

## **Stephen Johnson**

Heroism came naturally to Stephen Johnson — as Linda Kalodner learned firsthand.

On March 11, 1999, Kalodner was the mother of 6-month-old twins, and she and the babies were trapped by a fire on the ninth floor of a Manhattan building. Up a fully extended tower ladder came Johnson and his partner Matt Barnes.

Strapped to the top of the aerial, arms and legs stretched as far as possible, Barnes took the infants from Kalodner and passed them to Johnson, who carried the babies to safety. The partners were feted at City Hall, and the Daily News named Barnes its Hero of the Month. Less than two years later, Barnes was killed on 9/11 and Johnson went to work at Ground Zero, there when the toxic cloud was thickest, there when the job required wading in dust up to his knees. He was a big, strapping guy, fit and healthy, and his every breath moved him closer to death.

In April 2002, still healthy, Johnson retired from a job that was a joy of his life. "Next to me, it was the only other thing he loved," said his widow, Rose.

Early in 2004, Johnson became short of breath while shoveling snow. Over the next few weeks, his shortness of breath worsened. That March, he went to a hospital, where doctors feared he was suffering a heart attack. That wasn't the case, and that May he was diagnosed with interstitial lung disease, or ILD.

Caused by inhaling irritants, ILD is a rare condition found, for example, in miners who work amid coal dust. The presence of particles in the lung provokes the body to try to combat them as it would fight a germ. The immune system surrounds the particles with cells that build up into nodules known as granulomas. Granulomas retard breathing, can cause lesions and lead to irreversible scarring, called fibrosis, on oxygen-extracting tissues.

By the time Johnson was diagnosed, 80% of his lungs had been destroyed. He required oxygen 24 hours a day, and joined the waiting list for a lung transplant. But he never got that far. Suffocating, Johnson suffered a fatal heart attack.

After 15 years of marriage, Rose Johnson lives by herself in Queens. She shies from criticizing city officials for their failure to honor her husband as the first Ground Zero responder to die from an illness contracted there. Nor does she complain that, until today, the circumstances of her husband's illness and death have never been reported. But the pain is obvious in her voice when she recounts her memories of his loss. Only when she points out that the Bravest at her local firehouse give her all the support she asks for does her voice brighten.

Rose Johnson has her husband's pension, but not the full-salary death benefit given to the widows of firefighters who die in the line of duty. Spouses of retirees are not eligible.

## **James Godbee**

James Godbee was the next responder to die after contracting an interstitial lung disease.

A 19-year NYPD veteran and father of two, Godbee worked at Ground Zero for 12 to 15 hours a day for 80 days from Sept. 13, 2001, to June 2002. Never did he wear respiratory equipment.

In November 2003, Godbee developed a cough, shortness of breath, joint pains, fever, weight loss and swelling in his salivary and tear glands. Based on a chest X-ray three months later, his doctors suspected sarcoidosis, a form of ILD.

Dr. Frank Accera, a pulmonary specialist at Beth Israel Medical Center, performed a biopsy, during which Godbee's lung collapsed. The test confirmed the diagnosis.

Sarcoidosis is believed to be caused by contact with irritating foreign substances, but no irritant has ever been identified as its trigger. In addition to the lungs, the illness attacks organs such as the heart, skin and kidneys. Treatable and rarely fatal, sarcoidosis can lead to "progressive multi-organ failure in an unfortunate minority" of cases, according to a 1997 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

High dosages of a steroid got Godbee's symptoms under control, but the drug made him sick to his stomach. Over the next seven months, Godbee's lung distress fluctuated as he tried to wean off the steroid, and, feeling generally better, he stopped seeing Accera in October 2004.

Godbee's wife, Michelle, a school guidance counselor, said her husband continued to work. On Dec. 30, 2004, he felt "a little down, a little sick," but he nonetheless took the couple's daughter to a Jim Carrey movie, Michelle Godbee said. At 9:45, he returned to the family's apartment in Manhattan's Stuyvesant Town, gave his daughter "a long hug good night," and minutes later suffered a seizure.

"I called 911. They told me to put him on the floor," Michelle Godbee said. "I heard his lungs go down. He was pronounced DOA at the hospital."

James Godbee was 44. An autopsy found granuloma in his lungs, colon and heart. In his report on the case, Accera wrote: "It is with a reasonable degree of medical certainty that I conclude that Mr. Godbee's exposure to and inhalation of the toxic materials present at the WTC site after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, either caused or aggravated his sarcoidosis and ultimately caused his death."

Regardless, the NYPD pension board ruled Godbee had not contracted sarcoidosis in the line of duty, stating the condition is "not known to be related to employment in the police force." The board denied his family the enhanced benefits afforded to cops who die in the line of duty. When Michelle Godbee took the matter to court, city lawyers fought her petition — even barring FDNY

doctors, experts in sarcoidosis, from testifying. A judge returned the matter to the board for further review.

## **James Zadroga**

On Jan. 5 of this year, homicide Detective James Zadroga became the third responder to succumb to interstitial lung disease.

On the force for six years, Zadroga was inside 7 World Trade Center as the building began to collapse. He escaped and returned to Ground Zero, spending more than 450 hours there and at the Staten Island landfill, where the rubble from the Trade Center was carted. He wore only a paper mask.

Within a few weeks, Zadroga began to cough. Over the next months, the formerly healthy 29-year-old developed severe shortness of breath, acid reflux and sleep apnea. He began passing out and, coughing incessantly, was unable to walk more than 100 feet without gasping.

Zadroga's downward spiral forced him onto extended sick leave. By 2003, he required oxygen 24 hours a day. He was rejected three times for a line-of-duty disability pension; the retirement system's medical board said he hadn't proven a connection between his Ground Zero work and his illness.

Only on Zadroga's fourth appeal did the doctors come around. He retired Nov. 1, 2004. Fourteen months later, with his 4-year-old daughter Tylerann asleep by his side, Zadroga died at age 34. He was a widower with \$50,000 in medical bills. Grandparents took custody of the orphaned Tylerann.

The coroner's report listed the cause of death as "granulomatous pneumonitis."

"It is felt with a reasonable degree of medical certainty that the cause of death in this case was directly related to the 9/11 incident," wrote Ocean County, N.J., pathologist Dr. Gerard Breton. His report, often cited as the first official confirmation that service on The Pile had proven fatal, was dismissed by city officials as inconclusive.

## **Debbie Reeve**

Debbie Reeve joined the EMS in 1989, working first as an emergency medical technician and then as a paramedic. Assigned to a haz-mat unit, she spent more than six months collecting human remains from The Pile and staffing a Ground Zero morgue.

Early in 2004, Reeve developed a cough and shortness of breath after exertion. Her doctor diagnosed flu and pneumonia and prescribed antibiotics that proved useless. Out of sick time, she asked for clearance to return to work, which required a chest X-ray because of her haz-mat status. The X-ray led to the discovery of mesothelioma, a rare cancer caused by asbestos.

From late 2004 until late 2005, Reeve underwent chemotherapy, followed by removal of her right lung and part of her diaphragm. She had radiation and was declared cancer-free.

Six weeks later, Reeve started having pain in her leg and hip, and X-rays showed mottling in her thigh bones — a sign the cancer had returned. In January 2006, doctors removed infected marrow from her legs, but a month later they found cancer in her back, lung and spine.

On March 15, Reeve died at age 41, leaving an 11-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old son.

Before her death, Reeve had become the first WTC responder to be granted a three-quarters disability pension under a special bill signed in Albany, but she died before receiving a single check. Her husband, David, also an FDNY paramedic, is now battling for workers' compensation coverage of \$90,000 in medical bills. Opposing him is the city Law Department, where attorneys have argued both that he didn't file his claim within a required deadline and that there's no proof Reeve developed mesothelioma from working at Ground Zero.

Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve are but four of the 9/11 responders who have suffered serious illnesses. David Worby, a lawyer waging a suit on behalf of 8,000 WTC responders and their survivors, says, for example, that more than 170 of his clients have developed cancers and 57 have died.

Whether those cancers trace to Ground Zero is a matter of conjecture, but fear is widespread among those who served. This is understandable. What is not understandable has been the refusal of city officials to admit even a probability that 9/11 service led to any death.

Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden exemplified the attitude when he said he would be "surprised" if Zadroga's suffocation could be conclusively linked to particles breathed in at Ground Zero. The coroner, he said, had not tested the materials in Zadroga's lungs to see if they matched exactly with substances at The Pile.

True enough, but that hypertechnicality is far outweighed by the body of evidence.

Johnson, Godbee, Zadroga and Reeve were healthy, relatively young nonsmokers before they spent hundreds of hours in the poisonous cloud at The Pile.

They contracted diseases triggered by inhaling substances that irritate the lungs.

Other 9/11 responders came down with the same rare illness, interstitial lung disease, suffered by Johnson, Zadroga and Godbee and survived. Two firefighters and a civilian worker got the type of ILD that struck Johnson and Zadroga; 20 firefighters got the variation, sarcoidosis, that felled Godbee. Among the survivors, the conditions are generally accepted as being caused by WTC toxins.

Mesothelioma, Reeve's cancer, is found overwhelmingly in people who have breathed in asbestos. What's surprising is only the speed with which the disease came on after Reeve was exposed, said the FDNY's Kelly.

Stephen Johnson, James Godbee, James Zadroga and Debbie Reeve died because they served New York in a time of need. Then they were forgotten. Now Mayor Bloomberg must give them the honor they deserve.